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Court House

STATE MEMORIAL



In Lincoln on City U.S. 66

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STATE OF ILLINOIS

POSTVILLE COURT HOUSE

Once the most imposing building in Logan County, the reconstructed Postville Court House in Lincoln, is one of the newest of the Illinois state memorials. In 1953 the State was given by the Logan County Historical Society the square block of 1.14 acres on which the original building had stood. On this high point in the southwest part of Lincoln was the oldest court house in the old Eighth Circuit which Abraham Lincoln had traveled for a quarter of a century.

When Logan County was carved out of Sangamon County in 1839, the county seat was placed in Postville. Russell Post had optimistically plotted the town in 1835. At that time Lincoln was still a young surveyor pouring over his law books in preparation for his bar examination that year. Other land speculators shortly afterwards added more land to the town and in 1836 Postville, on paper, was a city of over 150 blocks.

The year 1837 saw a depression and Post had to sell most of his holdings to the new promoters, Knapp, Bird and Tinsley. One of these men, Seth M. Tinsley, in 1839 offered to build a court house without cost to the county. As a result of this offer Postville by one vote won over Mt. Pulaski as the county seat.

Tinsley supervised the construction of the building which was 28 feet by 38 feet. Placed on a stone foundation, it was two stories in height, had oak beams and walnut siding. It cost Tinsley and his partners \$1,176.83 and was completed some time in 1840.

The building had a court room and county offices. Nearby the county built a jail of notched logs, 12 feet square and two stories high. The jail interior was covered with two inch heavy oak planks. Before the court house was built court sessions were held in the dining room of the Deskins tavern.

The court house was a civic center and served as a church and place for public gatherings. The high point of its use, however, was "court week." As one western traveler wrote, "Court week is a general holiday. Not only suitors, jurors and witnesses, but all who can spare the time, brush up their coats and brush down their horses to go to court."

Following the Kentucky pattern, from whence came many Illinois citizens, a judicial circuit system was adopted in 1839. The state was divided into circuits and each circuit had a judge. This judge traveled from county to county in his circuit until he made the rounds in transacting the legal business of each county.

Lincoln and a group of traveling lawyers rode to Postville and the other towns on the circuit as the courts met. Although this circuit changed from time to time, it was tremendous in size. Once this circuit covered 11,000 square miles, slightly larger than the state of Maryland.

Serving a thinly scattered population, the lawyers of Lincoln's day had to ride the circuit to make a living. Some, like Lincoln, had little formal training and others had been well educated in the east. Here was a real matching of legal talents and wits.

It was a hard life with small fees and intolerable pioneer living conditions. Lincoln seemed to thrive on it. His famous story telling sessions, the close friendships and political contacts compensated for the weary hours of travel and poor food and lodgings. He gave about half of each year to circuit traveling, except for the two years he was in Congress, up until he became President.

The county seat was moved in 1847 to Mt. Pulaski while Lincoln was in Washington. This community, as an attraction, built a fine two-story court house which is now a state memorial. The county seat in 1853 was removed to Lincoln.

Unfortunately the Logan County records burned in 1857 and there is little known of the cases handled by Lincoln in Postville. The late Judge Lawrence B. Stringer of Lincoln told of this interesting case involving both Postville and Mt. Pulaski.

"The removal of the county seat from Postville to Mt. Pulsaki brought on litigation in which Mr. Lincoln took a leading part.

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At the time of the original location of the county seat at Postville, the proprietors of that town orally agreed, as an inducement for the location, to build a court house on a block owned by them and deed all to the county, which they did.

"The deed was in fee simple without reservations or conditions. On removal of the county seat, the county commissioners sold the block and building to private parties, whereupon the Postville proprietors sued the county for damages. The case was tried before Judge Davis at Mt. Pulaski in August of 1849.

"Abraham Lincoln appeared for the county. Stuart and Logan, both former law partners of Mr. Lincoln, and a son of Gov. Ninian Edwards appeared for the proprietors of Postville. Mr. Lincoln contended that the agreement was 'against public policy and founded on corruption' and that, in deeding the land without reservations, the proprietors took their chances on the people changing the county seat.

"Judge Davis found for the county and, on appeal, the Supreme Court sustained Davis. The opinion has been cited in this and other states and by the United States Supreme Court as a leading case."

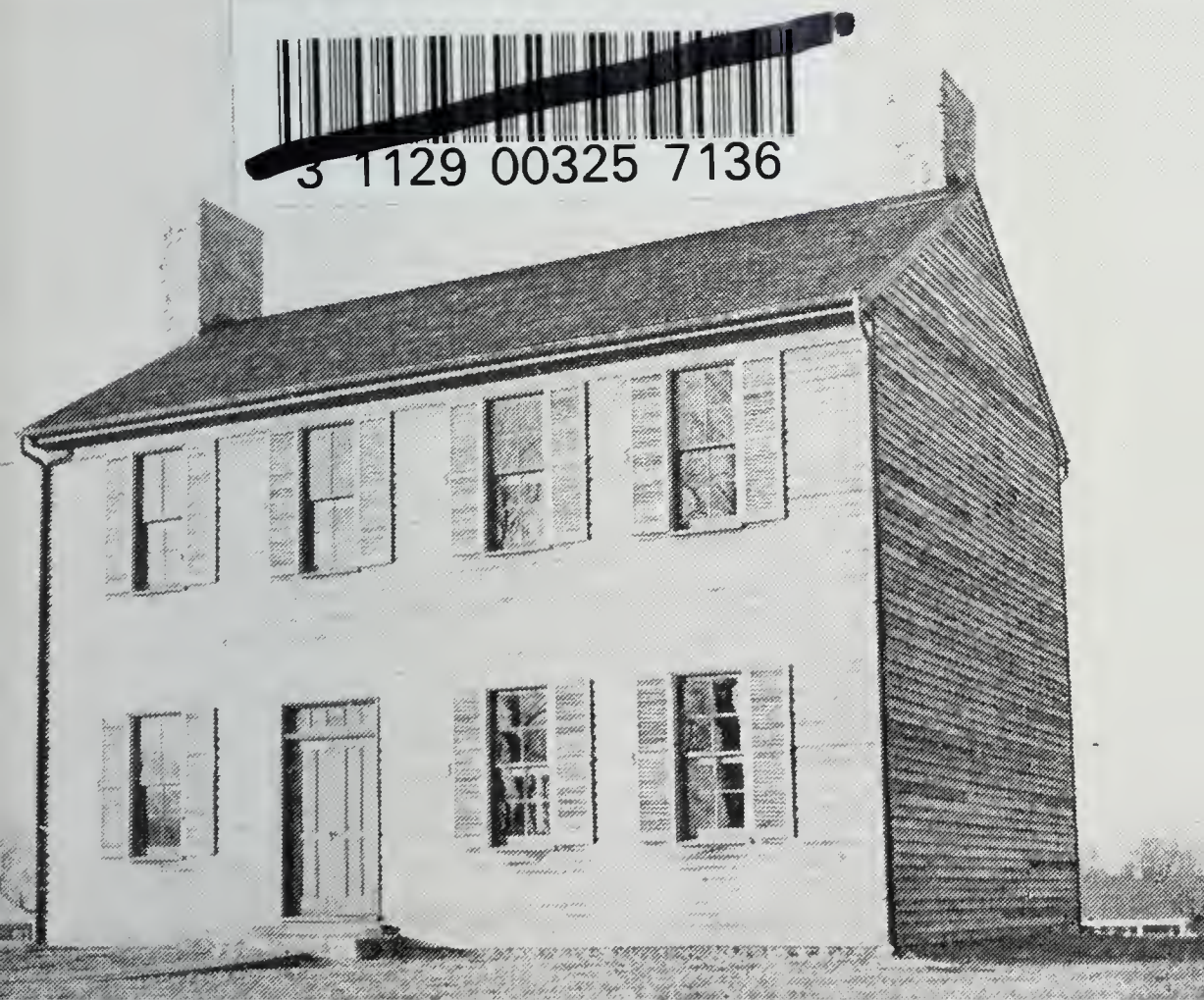
Despite the protests of a group of leading citizens the Postville Court House was purchased in 1929 by Henry Ford for inclusion in his famous Greenfield Village at Dearborn, Michigan. Here it stands today facing the village green adjacent to the Thomas Edison laboratories.

At the time of the purchase of the court house by Ford it was being occupied rent free by a poor family. For two decades previously the building's owner, T. T. Beach, had wished to give the building to Logan County providing the board of supervisors would maintain it. The county never could see fit to accept his generous offer. During recent years the court house block has been used as a playground.

The state in 1953, coincident with the Lincoln centennial program, built the rough exterior of the reconstructed court house from plans made off of the original building in the Greenfield Village. Late in 1955 a contract was let for the completion of the interior, plastering, painting and the installation of a heating plant and public toilets in the basement.

Furnishings are now being acquired so that one day the court house can be brought back to its original appearance. The completed building will have among its exhibits several dealing with early Illinois judicial practices.

Interestingly, one chimney is placed inside and the other is built on the outside of the court house.



Write to the Division of Parks and Memorials, 100 State Office Building, Springfield, for further information concerning Illinois Parks and Memorials.

Eighty State Parks and Memorials are of easy access from every part of the State. Lodges and cabins are an important feature of Starved Rock, Pere Marquette, White Pines Forest and Giant City State Parks. Reservations should be made with lodge managers.

(All State Memorials Open the Year Around)

Issued by
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